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ABSTRACT

A survey instrument was developed to identify the impact the World Trade Center and the Pentagon bombings of September 11, 2001, had on African American college students attending an Historically Black College-University (HBCU) in the South. The survey was administered to 136 students 8 days after the bombings in an effort to gain insight into their immediate impact on a select group of Americans. Students who participated in the study appeared to have experienced a number of reactions typical of persons who were in close proximity to a disaster but were not direct victims themselves. They did not have symptoms consistent with posttraumatic stress syndrome disorder. Most had serious concerns about flying, while a sizable minority felt unsafe in general. Few blamed Middle Easterners in general for the terrorist acts, and even fewer wanted profiling to be used as a means of identifying terrorists. The respondents appeared to be doing what they needed to do to return to normalcy, and talking about the incident may be the most therapeutic thing they did. Several limitations of the study are discussed, including that it occurred just eight days after the bombings, which may have been too early to assess the impact on the participants. (JDM)

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A Survey of African American College Students: Reactions to the Terrorist Acts of September 11, 2001

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On the morning of September 11, 2001, Americans were suddenly changed forever when terrorists flew commercial airline planes into the World Trade Center (WTC) and the Pentagon. The catastrophe that took place was seen by millions as it transpired without warning. The event seemed like some surreal special effects that captivated onlookers as they gazed in horror. Prior to this event, Americans had the luxury of rarely having to consider the threat of terrorism. Two notable exceptions include the Oklahoma City bombing and the previous bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 (Ofman, Mastria & Steinberg, 1995). Yet, these two events pale in the face of the human carnage seen in the death toll in the latest acts of terrorism which have claimed nearly 6,000 lives.

Ofman, Mastria and Steinberg (1995) investigated the impact of the first terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center that occurred on February 26, 1993. These investigators made distinctions between the impact of man-made disasters versus natural disasters. In natural disasters, there are identifiable low points, after which the worse is over and people can begin to recover. In contrast, man-made disasters generally pose greater uncertainty about when it will end and the impact this may have on its victims as well as those living in surrounding areas. Additionally, New York area residents unaccustomed to a threat on their own soil, had to cope with the fact that the alleged

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perpetrators were residing among them. This awareness resulted in a diffuse chilling fear and suspicion among New Yorkers.

The 1993 WTC bombing prompted questions about the failure of responsible people to provide a security plan that might have prevented the incident. Many residents expressed lingering fears concerning safety and these fears were directed at those in government who were viewed as having failed to protect them (Ofman, Mastria & Steinberg, 1995). Other researchers have noted similar reactions of victims blaming the government for not taking appropriate actions to ensure safety against terrorists (Beigel & Berren, 1985). Also, it is not uncommon to find victims confronting the motives, logic and psychological makeup of the terrorist as a means of helping them understand what took place (Duffy, 1988; Ofman, et al, 1995).

Ofman, et al (1995) found victims to experience a feeling of loss of control and vulnerability unlike that of any they had ever experienced previously. They felt both personally and as citizens under threat, not knowing when the bombing might occur again. They reported a persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event; avoidance of stimuli associated with the event; a numbing of general responsiveness; increased arousal; and sleep disturbances and nightmares. Some victims cried silently while one sobbed openly. Others reported symptoms of dreaming of the bombing, being chased by threatening characters, or in some way finding themselves or family/friends in danger.

Some avoided discussions of the event and this often meant not communicating with family and friends because the bombing was the major topic of conversation. This also extended to not reading newspapers or watching TV because the bombing was heavily covered by the media. This reaction in turn led to feelings of detachment and

isolation. Other symptoms include loss of memory, interest, motivation, loss of sleep, loss of appetite, depressed mood, anxiety, forgetfulness, poor concentration, heightened fear response (often at phobic levels), headaches, stomach aches, muscle aches, pain, hyperventilation, stereotyped movements such as walking in circles, pacing, rubbing fingers together or wringing hands (Ofman, et al, 1995).

Given the enormity of the WTC and Pentagon bombings on September 11, 2001 and the potential impact that it has had on all citizens of this nation, the current research was prompted. More specifically, a survey instrument was developed to identify the impact that this catastrophe event has had on African American college students attending a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in the South. A convenient sample of General Psychology students was used. The survey was administered eight days after the bombings in an effort to gain insight into its immediate impact on a select group of Americans.

Method

Instrument

Demographic information collected included sex, age, race, and classification. One question asked on the instrument was whether respondents had actually watched on TV as the second plane hit the WTC and respondents could answer yes or no to that question. The remaining 25 items focused mainly on their emotional reaction to the situation based on some of the findings of Ofman, et al (1995). Respondents could indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree or strongly disagree with the item.

Results

A total of 136 students in two sections of General Psychology 210 at an HBCU completed the questionnaire. The sample included 48 males (33.5%) and 88 females (65%) with 98.5% African Americans and 1.5% white. Sixty percent were freshmen, 28% were sophomores, seven percent were juniors and five percent were seniors. Seventy percent of students were watching TV when the second plane hit the other World Trade Center tower. Ninety-seven percent of students indicated that they were shocked when they learned about the bombings. Eighty-five percent indicated their initial reaction was disbelief.

Ninety-seven percent were sad about the bombings. Fifty-five percent felt fearful in general while 65% were afraid to fly. Thirty-eight percent felt unsafe in general. Eighty-five percent were angry at the terrorists that committed the act. Sixty percent were angry at the government/airlines for not providing greater security to prevent this event from occurring. Eighty-two percent indicated they watched TV daily to find out the latest news concerning the incident. Thirty-one percent indicate they felt hostile since the bombings occurred. Twenty-three percent indicated they felt irritable following the bombings. Eighty-one percent indicated that they often talked with others about the bombings whereas only 60 percent said it made them feel better by talking about it with others.

Seventy-two percent indicated that they think about it daily. Thirty percent said they gave some contribution to the victims of the terrorist attack. Sixty-three percent wanted President Bush to avenge the deaths. Seventy-seven percent thought the USA should find out why the terrorists bombed us and change what we do that might have prompt that kind of action. Eighty-seven percent indicated that they were beginning to return to their everyday routine. Thirty-five percent were suspicious of people from the middle east, but only 29% thought the government should use racial profiling to find terrorists. Only fourteen percent indicated they had experienced physical symptoms related to the bombings and seven percent said they cried as a reaction to the bombing.

Discussion

The students that participated in this study appear to have experienced a number of the reactions typical of persons in close proximity to a disaster, but not direct victim themselves. They did not experience problems sleeping or have any of the physical symptoms consistent with posttraumatic stress syndrome disorder (PTSD). Still, most had serious concerns about flying while a sizable minority felt unsafe in general. They were angry at the terrorists that committed the act and wanted the deaths of so many Americans avenged. Interestingly, few blamed middle easterners in general for the terrorist acts and even fewer wanted profiling to be used as a means of identifying terrorists. Perhaps having been victims of racial profiling, many African Americans are sensitive to such issues and are unwilling to inflict such methods on others.

Many of them thought about the incident daily and found some comfort in talking to others about it. The respondents appeared to be doing the things that they

needed to do in order to return to normalcy. That is, they discussed the incident with others, gathered information about it by watching TV daily, some gave to the victims or their families and most probably returned to their daily routine (this was not directly measure). Talking about the incident is perhaps the most therapeutic thing that individuals can do. When individuals are able to discuss their feelings, they gain clarity and are able to work through their difficulties. Also, when individuals are able to take some action on their behave, it enhances their sense of personal control and brings back a greater sense of normalcy. Generally, research suggests that when individuals suffer a major loss, they often experience the initial response of shock and numbness which may last a few hours up to a week. Since this research was conducted eight days after the incident, it is possible that the respondents were still in a state of shock and numbness. Thus, it may have been too early to assess the other stages that are typical of the grief response. An assess of these respondents at six weeks may reveal additional reactions and this is planned.

Some of the results appears to be consistent with the findings of Osfman et al (1995) and a follow-up might reveal even greater similarities. The limitations of this study include the convenient sampling used which severely limits what can be said about the population of African American college students in general. Also, the disproportionate number of females (65%) versus males (33.5%) makes it impossible to accurately look at any gender differences that might exist. Still, this was an opportunity to get a flashbulb shot of an historic event and gain some sense of how individuals react to it.

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